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ABSTRACT

Based on a native English-speaking teacher's perception that Chinese university students of English as a Second Language have greater skill in vocabulary than in the communication of ideas, a survey of students in one class investigated attitudes about the role of nonverbal communication in the communication process. Responses indicate a lack of understanding of nonverbal communication processes. Over half the students surveyed felt they were more expressive nonverbally when they are speaking English than when speaking Chinese, and most felt nonverbal communication in the two languages differs. A strong majority felt they could communicate better in English if they learned more nonverbal communication norms in English-speaking countries. The need for more emphasis on nonverbal communication is evident from these responses. High- and low-context communication processes illustrate the effect of culture on the listening process. Expectations can differ greatly in the two kinds of communication. At a minimum, theory that can enhance understanding of nonverbal communication processes should be taught, with emphasis placed on general ideas rather than specific skills. Work in proxemics, vocalics, kinesics, eye behavior, and tactile communication would contribute to awareness. A 13-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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THE NEED FOR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION THEORY WHEN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY IN CHINA

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THE NEED FOR NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION THEORY WHEN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY IN CHINA

This paper describes the need for nonverbal communication theory when teaching English as a second language. The specific application in the paper is based in China but the main points are relevant wherever English is taught as a second language. The paper is based on a review of literature and a survey of Chinese students who studied English as a second language. The underlying idea posits English vocabulary is adequately stressed but more emphasis is needed with actual communication skills. In this case, awareness of nonverbal communication dynamics.

There has been a dramatic increase in world trade since World War II. This increase has also involved a variety of other developments promoting international interaction. English has become a predominant language in the international community and the teaching of English, to non-native speakers, has become common all over the world.

During the spring term (March-June) 1987, the author was a visiting professor at Northern Jiaotong University in Beijing, The People's Republic of China and taught English as a second language to native Chinese speakers. This opportunity provided him the chance to work with a team of faculty members, teaching the same course, and the chance to research the process of teaching English as a second language.

Since the opening of China in 1979, the learning of English has been emphasized strongly. "China still has a long way to go in making its population fully literate in Chinese, let alone in English. But in terms of both national goals and individual aspirations, English is near the top of the list" (Jacobsen, October 18, 1987, p. 40).

English is usually taught in the latter years of primary school. Many university students have had about eight years of English training before entering the university. "In the universities, students practice English with a passion that comes from knowing where the future lies (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 40).

The teaching of English is done, to a considerable degree, outside of the traditional classroom. "Lessons also are broadcast on national radio everyday" (Jacobsen, October 28, 1987, p. 40).

"Nearly two million people are now following satellite T.V. education programs in their spare time, according to the State Education Commission" (China Daily, May 12, 1987, p. 3). The educational T.V. channel opened in October, 1986. "It is now used mainly for the training of middle and primary school teachers, higher adult education and secondary vocational education" (China Daily, May 15, 1987, p. 3).

An article entitled "TV series to help kids learn English" described a "new TV series to help Chinese children in primary schools to learn English" (China Daily, May 1, 1987, p. 5). Entitled "Let's Learn English," the program is a response to the shortage of qualified English teachers in China.

A common problem in teaching English in China is that students can learn the English vocabulary but have difficulty in communicating and understanding conceptual meanings. "Lack of competent English teachers and underestimation of the lesson time that should be devoted to verbal comprehension and speaking in English were mainly responsible for students low performance in learning English" (China Daily, May 2, 1987, p. 3).

"The poor English ability of middle school students is a potential obstacle to the country's opening to the outside world" (China Daily, May 2, 1987, p. 3). An official government

objective, such as the opening of China, is taken very seriously by the Chinese people. Thus, answers to such problem situations are actively sought.

In teaching English as a second language, the emphasis on the communication process cannot be understated. Dorothy Bainton, chairman of the pathology department at the University of California at San Francisco, conducts a two week workshop to prepare Chinese health care workers who will be studying in the U.S. Her program emphasizes "even though they may read English quite well, they may have difficulty understanding the spoken language and making themselves understood. And they face the broader problem of conflicting American and Chinese rules about communication and socialization" (Jacobsen, November 4, 1987, p. A49).

During his teaching assignment in China, the author perceived student comprehension of English language vocabulary to be far better than their ability to communicate their ideas and understand the ideas of others. Based upon his experience, he hypothesized their comprehension of factual information is good but their comprehension of main ideas is deficient. Observation of, and discussion with, other teachers evidenced a curriculum that contained no emphasis on the importance of nonverbal communication skills in the communication process. Thus students were primarily taught words and expressions but were not taught about communicating or interpreting ideas. The latter seemed to be assumed.

A written survey of six questions was administered to an English class of twenty students. These students were freshmen in the teacher preparation program at Northern Jiaotong University. They were requested to respond to six statements (SA - strongly agree, A - agree, N - neutral, D - disagree, or SD - strongly disagree). The purpose of the survey was to study their perceptions of the role of nonverbal communication in the communication process. Results of the survey are as follows.

1. Verbal communication carries more meaning with a message than nonverbal communication.

SA	A	N	D	SD
10%	20%	35%	30%	5%

2. Native speakers of English are more expressive nonverbally (i.e. gesture more) than are native Chinese people.

SA	A	N	D	SD
	30%	50%	10%	10%

3. I tend to be more expressive nonverbally when I'm speaking English than when I'm speaking Chinese.

SA	A	N	D	SD
10%	45%	15%	30%	

4. American nonverbal communication is different than British nonverbal communication.

SA	A	N	D	SD
10%	45%	35%	10%	

5. American nonverbal communication is different than Chinese nonverbal communication.

SA	A	N	D	SD
25%	55%	25%	15%	

6. I think I could communicate better in English if I learned more about nonverbal communication norms in English speaking countries.

SA	A	N	D	SD
50%	40%	5%	5%	

The survey responses indicate a lack of understanding of nonverbal communication processes. For the purpose of this report, the author is most concerned with questions three, five, and six.

Question three responses indicate a little more than half of the students feel they are more expressive nonverbally when they are speaking English than when they are speaking Chinese. Fifty-five percent agreed with this statement while only 30 percent disagreed with the statement.

Question five responses show most students feel American nonverbal communication is different than Chinese nonverbal communication. Eighty percent agreed with this statement and only 15 percent disagreed.

Question six responses demonstrate a strong majority of the students feel they could communicate better in English if they learned more about nonverbal communication norms in English

speaking countries. Ninety percent agreed with this point of view and only five percent disagreed with the statement.

The survey results do not reveal a major void in student understanding of the role of nonverbal communication in human interaction but the need for more emphasis on nonverbal communication is evident. When linked with the deficiencies described in newspaper/journal accounts of English education in China, a pattern of how English is taught presents itself. It is the author's contention this process achieves the basic objective of teaching vocabulary but more emphasis on the communication process, in this case nonverbal communication, will enhance student understanding considerably. It is helpful to consider the role of cross-cultural communication differences within the learning of a new language.

Cross-cultural communication "occurs when two or more individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact together . . . . In most situations intercultural interactants do not share the same language. But languages can be learned and larger communication problems occur in the nonverbal realm" (Andersen, 1986). "Since we are not usually aware of our own nonverbal behavior it becomes extremely difficult to identify and master the nonverbal behavior of another culture. At times we feel uncomfortable in other cultures because we intuitively know something isn't right" (Andersen, 1987, pp. 2-3). "Because nonverbal behaviors are rarely conscious phenomena, it may be difficult for us to know exactly why we are feeling uncomfortable" (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984, p. 149).

The effect of the cultural backgrounds of interactants on human interaction is a crucial consideration. "Culture is the enduring influence of the social environment on our behavior including our interpersonal communication behaviors" (Andersen, 1987, p. 6). The culture of an individual dictates interpersonal behavior through "control mechanisms--plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call 'programs')--for the governing of behavior" (Geertz, 1973, p. 44). Thus, the processes for presentation of ideas (speaking) and the reception of ideas (listening) will understandably vary from culture to culture.

The implications of high and low context communication processes, across cultures, provides another example of the effect of culture on the listening process. "A high-context communication message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted parts of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). For instance, people who know each other very well can communicate through unexplicit messages which are not readily understandable to a third party. "In high-context situations or cultures information is integrated from the environment, the context, the situation, and from nonverbal cues that give the message meaning unavailable in the explicit verbal utterance" (Andersen, 1987, p. 22).

Low context messages (and cultures) are just the opposite of high context messages; most of the information is in the explicit

code (Hall, 1976). Low context messages must be elaborated, clearly communicated, and highly specific (Andersen, 1987, p. 22). The lowest context cultures are probably Swiss, German, North American (including the U.S.) and Scandinavian (Hall, 1976, Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). These cultures are preoccupied with specifics, details, and precise time schedules at the expense of context (Andersen, 1987, p. 22).

The highest context cultures are found in the Orient. China, Japan, and Korea are very high context cultures (Elliot, Scott, Jensen, & McDonough, 1982; Hall, 1976). "Languages are some of the most explicit communication systems but the Chinese language is an implicit high context system" (Andersen, 1987, p. 23). Americans (from a low context culture) will complain that Japanese (from a high context culture) never "get to the point." This is due to a failure to recognize that high context cultures must provide a context and setting and let the point evolve (Hall, 1984).

People in high context cultures expect more than interactants in low context cultures (Hall, 1976). Such expectations assume the other person will "understand unarticulated feelings, subtle gestures and environmental clues that people from low context cultures simply do not process. Worse, both cultural extremes fail to recognize these basic differences in behavior, communication, and context and are quick to misattribute the causes for their behaviors" (Andersen, 1987, p. 25). Thus, awareness of nonverbal communication processes

can have direct benefits for the Chinese person (high context) learning English (low context) as a second language.

The author suggests, as a minimum, the teaching of theoretical considerations which can enhance understanding of the nonverbal communication processes. Emphasis on general ideas rather than specific skills can be helpful, depending on the learning situation, as awareness is the first step to overcoming nonverbal barriers. Emphasis on proxemics, vocalics, kinesics, eye behavior, and tactile communication would help provide a relevant awareness of nonverbal communication processes.

At the outset, it is very important to stress these nonverbal areas are relevant because the rules which govern these areas vary from culture to culture and language to language. Thus, when you travel to a foreign country you are exposed to a new verbal language and a new nonverbal code of behavior.

Proxemics is the study of physical space and how it is consciously used in our day to day interactions. This includes awareness of physical distances interactants maintain depending upon the purpose of the interaction (intimate, personal, social and public distances). Territoriality norms (how we maintain personal space) are also included in this area.

Vocalics deals with vocal cues such as rate, pitch, inflection, volume, quality and enunciation. These cues are important in the understanding of paralanguage in each culture. Paralanguage emphasizes not what is said but <u>how</u> it is said. Thus, meanings can vary significantly depending on how statements are said.

Kinesics is the study of body language such as hand, arm, chest and leg movements. Some of the more common kinesic behaviors are emblems, regulators, and illustrators. Emblems are acts which have a direct verbal translation. Regulators maintain the back and forth nature of speaking and listening. Illustrators support what we are saying verbally.

Eye behavior and tactile communication (touching behavior) are also important considerations when learning new nonverbal codes of behavior. Eye behavior signals the nature of a relationship and it monitors feedback from the other person. The location, amount, and intensity of tactile communication is culturally determined.

Again, it is a central premise that these nonverbal areas are important because the codes which govern each of these areas vary from culture to culture. Thus, if we are not sensitive to these considerations our nonverbal messages can contradict or negatively affect our verbal message.

The author feels acknowledgment of the ideas presented in this paper can substantially improve the teaching/learning of English as a second language. Specific applications would of course depend on the intended audience and the means used to convey information.

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